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French Parliamentarians Debate Biotechnology

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Report Highlights:

A Parliamentary working group is currently reviewing the impact and regulation of plant biotechnology in France. Its final report, expected in mid-April, is expected to influence the development of a comprehensive French Biotech Law, to be debated in the French Parliament in spring 2005. This legislation will include the transposition of EU 2001/18 into French law and other aspects of biotech regulation. At this point in the process, the working group is expected to support open-field testing of biotech crops, to encourage greater participation by "civil society" in the evaluation of GMOs, to draft unique-to-France regulations for non-biotech labeling, and to make recommendations on coexistence.

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Executive Summary

A Parliamentary working group reviewing various aspects of plant biotechnology in France recently conducted a number of public hearings where a number of issues were discussed. Interestingly, there now seems to be consensus that there is little need for concern for the health effects of biotech crop production. However, biotech supporters and distracters are still at odds over the environmental impacts. They cannot find common ground on open-field testing and coexistence. The role of the non-scientific community or "civil society" was also discussed in the evaluation of new biotech products. A number of participants expressed their preference for the labeling of animal products raised on biotech feed. Participants questioned the reliability of non-GM soybean channels the French have set up for animal feed. Finally, the working group addressed insurance provisions for coexistence.

The Parliamentary Working Group

As reported in FR4057 (dated October 27, 2004), the French National Assembly created a Parliamentary working group to review the "potential environmental and sanitary impact" of authorizing open-field testing of biotech crops and to make technical recommendations for France's national regulation of biotechnology. The President of the Parliamentary working group is Jean-Yves Le Deaut (Socialist), organizer of a biotech "citizen conference" in 1998, and generally favorable to biotechnology. The working group includes 31 Parliamentarians (20 Conservatives, 8 Socialists, 2 Communists and 1 Ecologist). The website of this group is: <http://www.assemblee-nat.fr/12/dossiers/ogm.asp> (all in French)

The working group hosted private and public hearings with biotech specialists from November 2004 to February 2005. In late February and early March, members of the group travelled to the United States, Spain and South Africa. Their final report will be released in mid-April 2005.

The conclusions of the report are likely to form the basis of France's national regulation of biotechnology, which is expected to include provisions from EU 2001/18 (France is very late in transposing the European Directive) as well as provisions on the coexistence of biotech and non-biotech crops that the EU left to member states to regulate. The European Commission set guidelines for coexistence in July 2003 (see http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/publi/reports/coexistence2/index_en.htm) and Member States are currently in the process of establishing national legislation relative to coexistence.

Participants

The associations, organizations and companies represented at the hearings of the Parliamentary working group and those providing information and advice were the following:

Acronyms	Organizations	Websites
AFSSA	French Food Safety Agency	http://www.afssa.fr
APCA	French Chambers of Agriculture	http://paris.apca.chambagri.fr/apca/Default.htm
ATTAC	Association for the Taxation of Transactions to Help Citizens	http://www.france.attac.org/
	Carrefour	http://www.carrefour.com/englis/homepage/index.jsp
CGB	Biomolecular Engineering Committee	http://www.ogm.gouv.fr/experi

		mentations/evaluation_scientifique/cgb/CGB.htm
CIRAD	French International Cooperation Center for Research in Agronomy in Developing Countries	http://www.cirad.fr
	Confederation Paysanne	http://www.confederationpaysanne.fr/index.php3
	Coop de France	http://cfca.magnitsite.net/sites/CFCA/default_old.aspx
CRII-GEN		http://www.crii-gen.org/indexf.htm
DGAL	Food Directorate of the French Ministry of Agriculture	http://www.ogm.gouv.fr/
DGCCRF	Fraud Control Office of the French Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry	http://www.minefi.gouv.fr/DGCCRF/index.html
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority	http://www.efsa.eu.int/
FNE	France Nature Environment	http://www.fne.asso.fr/
	Greenpeace	http://www.greenpeace.fr
INRA	French National Institute of Research in Agronomy	http://www.inra.fr
	Limagrain	http://www.limagrain.com/limagrain/uk/default.html
	Monsanto	http://www.monsanto.fr

Views on Health Impact of Biotech Crop Production

AFSSA shared results from their studies that showed the production of new biotech crops that are resistant to insects could have the doubly positive impact of lowering exposure to pesticides (especially in Developing Countries) and to mycotoxins, as mentioned in their report released in July 2004 (see Paris report FR4033, dated July 27, 2004). Also, CGB and French Academy of Medicine speakers shared survey results concluding that approved GMOs are no more toxic or allergenic than conventional products.

The President of the working group Jean-Yves Le Déaut concluded from these hearings that the health impact of GM products is no longer a controlling issue, while that had been the case in the past. He recalled that in 1998 at a conference of citizens on biotechnology, there had been long discussions on the health impact of antibiotic resistance genes present in some GM crops.

Views on Open Field Testing

ATTAC, Greenpeace, Confédération Paysanne and organic growers continue to reject open-field testing of biotech crops, while INRA, CIRAD, Limagrain, Monsanto and APCA argued research work cannot be fully performed without testing in natural conditions.

The President of the working group clearly favors open-field testing, and reiterated a number of times his position during the public hearings. Several Parliamentarians considered that open-field testing is indispensable. It is therefore more than likely that the working group

will condemn the past destruction of test plots and recommend open-field testing in their final report.

Views on the Evaluation of Biotech Products

Under the current French system, CGB evaluates Biotech products with a committee composed of scientists and members of French "civil society." Some, including the consumer association UFC-Que Choisir and the anti-biotech farmers union, Confederation Paysanne, believe a two committee system would be preferable; a scientific committee and a separate committee composed of a wide range opinion makers from "civil society," consumer associations and environmental interest groups.

There was no clear indication at the public hearings on what recommendations the working group would make regarding the organization of the evaluation committees for new biotech products. However, it looks like the working group will recommend strengthening the role of "civil society" in the process.

Views on the Biotech Labeling of Animal Products

EU biotech regulation (1829/2003) doesn't require biotech labeling for animal products (dairy, meat and eggs). However, the working group found a lot of support for labeling in their public hearings and industry exchanges. Labeling supporters included the supermarket chain Carrefour, UFC-Que Choisir and Coop de France.

It is very unlikely that the Parliamentary working group will include biotech labeling requirements in its recommendations. Le Déaut said he was personally against it, and insisted that 0.9% is not a food safety threshold, but a political compromise. He said that if GM products were dangerous, there would be no threshold, but a zero tolerance.

Views on Non-Biotech Labeling

Retail giant Carrefour has worked hard to secure a non-biotech soybean channel from Brazil since 1999 (see FR3035, dated 7/17/03 and FR0024, dated 3/21/00). Pork and poultry meat from animals fed with this soybean meal is sold at Carrefour outlets. According to the supermarket chain, the biotech content of this soybean meal is tested by an independent laboratory and has a premium of 16 euros per MT.

Some members of the Parliamentary work group questioned the reliability of this non-biotech soybean channel, given that such traceability from Brazil (where biotech soybeans are increasingly grown) to France imposes additional costs on operators with no added value on the final products (Carrefour does not label this meat as derived from non biotech feed at the consumer end.) Carrefour explains that French regulations for a non-biotech label (see report FR4062, dated November 8, 2004) are too strict.

Although, there is no provision for negative labelling in EU biotech regulation, the Parliamentary working group is likely to make recommendations for non-biotech labeling in their final report for France.

Views on Coexistence

The Parliamentary work group seems aware that the first step to set coexistence rules is to set thresholds for adventitious presence in planting seeds, which the EU has so far failed to

do. In France, DGCCRF and DGAL test for the biotech content of planting seeds domestically produced and imported. Most tests have shown biotech contents under 0.1 percent. Under pressure from the French planting seed industry, the Parliamentary working group is likely to provide recommendations. Le Déaut have suggested that the same thresholds should be set for planting seeds as have been set for feed and food.

The working group may also recommend changing the commonly used word "contamination" for "dissemination." As pointed out by two Parliamentarians, who are also veterinarians, contamination is usually used in the case of a disease.

The working group is likely to make recommendations on coexistence that are based on current French practices. That is to separate the various channels (i.e. waxy corn, sweet corn, planting seeds, organic corn), as presented by Monsanto at the hearings.

Representatives of insurance industry said that they will be able to insure the risk of biotech dissemination provided that coexistence rules are clearly set. They said that they only insure against risks that are quantifiable.